

François Boucher

REDISCOVERED

The Conservation of Three Eighteenth-Century Works from the Permanent Collection



Los Angeles County Museum of Art

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The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) received in 1947, as part of the William Randolph Hearst Collection, two paintings with mythological subjects by the eighteenth-century French painter François Boucher (1703–70). *Venus and Mercury Instructing Cupid* (1738) represents the Roman deities Venus, mother of Cupid and goddess of love and beauty, and Mercury, god of commerce and messenger of the gods, instructing the infant Cupid, god of erotic love (figure 1). The other painting, *Cupid Wounding Psyche* (1741), shows the mature Cupid waking the object of his desire, the princess Psyche, with a harmless prick from one of his arrows (figure 2). In 1952 art collector and businessman J. Paul Getty donated to the museum a tapestry, *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1747–66), also designed by Boucher, illustrating the meeting of Bacchus, Greek god of wine, and Ariadne, daughter of the king of Crete (figure 10). The tapestry was part of a series titled *Loves of the Gods*, a compilation of mythological stories as told by a number of ancient authors.

In recent years the museum's curator of European painting and sculpture and its paintings conservators, having traced a series of alterations to the canvases, decided to restore them to their original kidney shapes. The curator and conservator for costumes and textiles studied the tapestry as well, then supervised its cleaning and stabilization. These three works of art by Boucher are eloquent examples of the artist's contribution to the design of interiors and of his role as a tastemaker in eighteenth-century France. Moreover, the exhibition illustrates the essential function of conservation in contributing to our understanding of works of art.

The subjects of the tapestry and paintings belong to a well-established repertoire drawn from antique sources. Eighteenth-century painters took particular inspiration, among the Latin poets, from Ovid, Horace, Apuleius, and Catullus. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*, for instance, were popular for their varied subjects, often with erotic overtones, and stories of the loves of the gods were preferred by both artists and the public. Occasionally such subjects bore an oblique allusion to the character of a patron or collector connected with the painting itself. More frequently, however, the choice of representations was arbitrary, and the work of art a mere vehicle for the artist to display his or her inventiveness and ability in rejuvenating themes that had been treated by earlier or contemporary artists.

Boucher's representations of gods and goddesses were immensely successful. His drawings and engravings after such subjects were used as models by the painters who decorated porcelain at the manufactory of Sèvres. His compositions appear frequently on plaques, vases, cups, saucers, and snuffboxes produced there.



The Overdoor Paintings

At the time Boucher's paintings were acquired by the museum, they were assumed to have been executed for the decoration of a *hôtel* (or residence) on the fashionable rue de Varenne in Paris—that of the Comte de Longaunay. This provenance has proved incorrect, however, since the count took possession of his residence in 1747, several years after Boucher completed the paintings. Their recent conservation has revealed new information that establishes beyond doubt their proper provenance.¹ The paintings in fact belonged to the decoration of the Hôtel de Mazarin, which also once stood on the rue de Varenne.

In the history of eighteenth-century French architecture, the Hôtel de Mazarin occupies a relatively modest position. Although not as famous as the grandiose Hôtel de Soubise, it shared with that residence many features characteristic of eighteenth-century Parisian decoration, notably elaborately carved and gilded woodwork panels, or *boiseries*, and decorative paintings designed to be set within those *boiseries*. The paintings now at LACMA were originally encased over the doors of a room, hence their appellation, "overdoors." Until the later years of the eighteenth century, fashionable interiors featured decoration with curvilinear shapes (a style often referred to as rococo). Therefore the spaces designated to accommodate paintings within *boiseries* were almost always irregular in shape, as can be seen, for instance, in the photograph of the *salon ovale* at the Hôtel de Soubise (figure 3).

The Hôtel de Mazarin owed its name to its second owner, Françoise de Mailly, Duchesse de Mazarin (d. 1742), who acquired the residence in 1736. The bankruptcy of the previous owner cut short an earlier renovation project, so at the time the duchess took possession of the building, it again needed remodeling. The duchess hired the most prominent artists available to her and put them under the direction of architect Jean-Baptiste Leroux. Leroux consequently contracted Nicolas Pineau (1684–1754)—a sculptor, carver, architect, and draftsman—to design and execute the *boiseries*. Leroux also hired the most sought-after painters in Paris, François Boucher and Charles-Joseph Natoire (1700–1777). In 1737, the date of the Mazarin commission, both artists were particularly active. Earlier that year they had been named members

of France's prestigious Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, and now could hardly keep up with the demand for their works. Boucher, for instance, exhibited six paintings at the Salon, the official exhibition organized by the Academy; accepted another commission for overdoors for the Hôtel de Soubise; supplied designs for the opera and the tapestry manufactory at Beauvais; and supervised the production of many engravings. Natoire was equally busy, particularly with a cycle of overdoors illustrating the story of Psyche, also for the Hôtel de Soubise. It is in this atmosphere of feverish activity that the conception and execution of the Boucher panels must be understood.



Figure 3
Salon ovale of the Hôtel de Soubise, Paris;
photo by Giraudon

Figure 1
François Boucher (France, 1703–70),
*Venus and Mercury instructing
Cupid*, 1738, oil on canvas, 27 1/8 x
60 in. (69.9 x 152.4 cm), Los
Angeles County Museum of Art,
William Randolph Hearst Collection,
47.29.10

Figure 2
François Boucher (France, 1703–70),
Cupid Wounding Psyche, 1741, oil
on canvas, 27 x 60 in. (68.6 x 152.4
cm), Los Angeles County Museum of
Art, William Randolph Hearst
Collection, 47.29.19

For both the Hôtel de Mazarin and Hôtel de Soubise, Boucher painted scenes of Venus and Mercury instructing Cupid (both versions executed in 1738), a fairly rare subject borrowed from the Renaissance novel *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), which was known to French artists in translation as *Le Songe de Poliphile*. Natoire, for his part, found inspiration for his cycle of Psyche paintings (1737) for the Hôtel de Soubise in the novel *The Golden Ass* by the Roman philosopher and satirist Lucius Apuleius. Boucher, in return, borrowed the subject made famous by his friend and rival for a second overdoor, *Cupid Wounding Psyche*, delivered in 1741 for the Hôtel de Mazarin, and now in LACMA's collection.

Natoire's and Boucher's paintings for the Hôtel de Mazarin were not to be seen in the same room. Natoire's were intended for the *grand salon*, whereas Boucher's decorated the more intimate *salon de compagnie*, a room intended for informal entertaining. Although the exact placement of the Boucher overdoors within the *salon de compagnie* is as yet unclear, we know from contemporary descriptions that the *grand salon* and the *salon de compagnie* were mirror images of one another.

The whereabouts of Natoire's overdoors for the *grand salon* is not known today, and until the conservation of the LACMA paintings, the Boucher overdoors were also thought to be lost. The three-year gap between the dates of the museum's paintings (*Venus and Mercury Instructing Cupid*, signed and dated 1738; *Cupid Wounding Psyche*, signed and dated 1741) had caused art historians to doubt that they belonged to the same ensemble.

The more likely explanation, however, is that because of his frantic activity at the time of the commission, Boucher was only able to deliver the paintings over several years. In fact, the whole project may have been left unfinished. Only the two LACMA paintings and an additional Boucher composition, *Venus and Cupid with Two Attendants* (figure 4), can be traced to the Mazarin commission. A fourth painting was still in Boucher's studio at the time of the duchess's death in 1742 and was apparently never delivered.

Until recently the only visual documents related to the Mazarin commission were four drawings in the National Museum, Stockholm. These were purchased, presumably from Boucher, by Count Gustav Tessin (1695–1770), the Swedish Envoy to France,



Figure 4
François Boucher (France, 1703–70), *Venus and Cupid with Two Attendants*, 1741, oil on canvas, formerly in a private collection, New York

a friend and an avid collector of his work. Each drawing is identified in contemporary handwriting as a study for the Hôtel de Mazarin. Their irregular shapes follow perfectly what we now know to be the original format of the museum's pictures. Yet although their mythological subjects relate closely to those of the LACMA paintings, their compositions are strikingly different. An explanation lies in an X-ray radiograph analysis of the paintings, which has revealed different compositions under the present ones. Fittingly, these correspond almost exactly to two of the four Stockholm drawings (figures 5–6). For example,



Figure 5
François Boucher (France, 1703–70), *The Education of Cupid*, c. 1736, black chalk, heightened with white, on blue paper, $7\frac{1}{2} \times 15\frac{1}{2}$ in. (19 x 40.1 cm), National Museum, Stockholm



Figure 6
François Boucher (France, 1703–70), *Cupid and Psyche*, c. 1736, black chalk, heightened with white, on blue paper, $7\frac{1}{4} \times 14$ in. (19.7 x 35.7 cm), National Museum, Stockholm

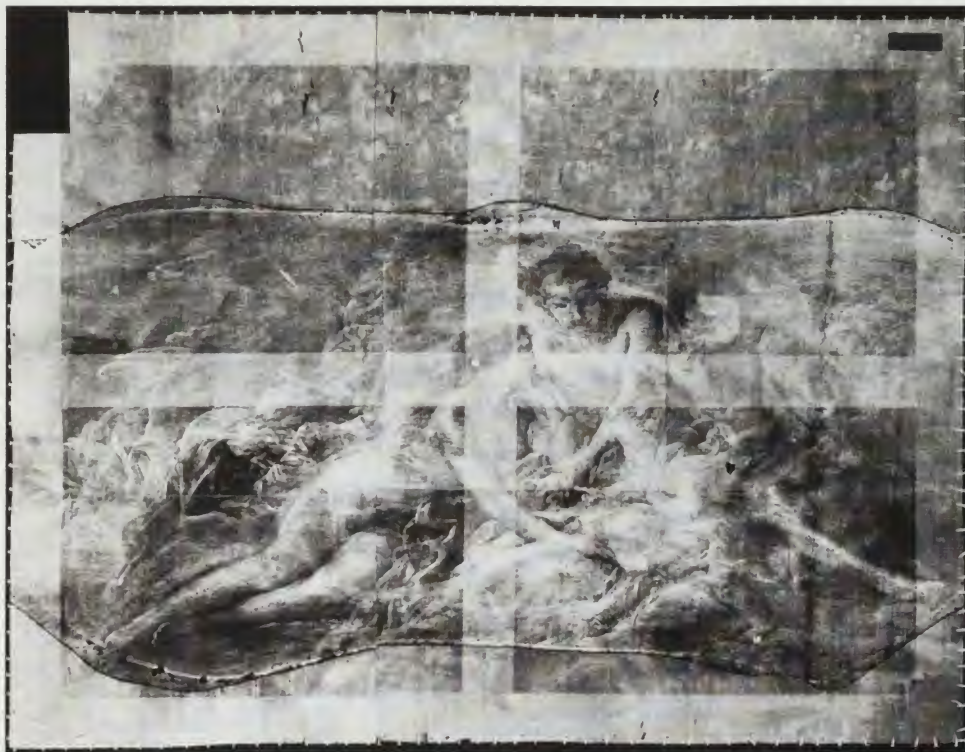


Figure 7
X-ray radiograph of *Venus and Mercury Instructing Cupid*



Figure 8
X-ray radiograph of *Cupid Wounding Psyche*

the X-ray radiograph of *Venus and Mercury Instructing Cupid* (figure 7) reveals that Mercury was originally positioned on his side, and two kissing doves are visible on his left. The X-ray radiograph of *Cupid Wounding Psyche* (figure 8) shows that Boucher had first placed Psyche above Cupid, who gazes up at her, as in the drawing of the pair.

What prompted the alteration of the compositions and shapes of the paintings? Exactly when or why Boucher changed his original compositions is still unknown, but such actions were not unusual. Artists often altered compositions to meet the specifications of a patron or setting. The modifications in the paintings' shapes, however, are explained by the ever-changing history of taste. The decor of the *salon de compagnie* in the Hôtel de Mazarin remained unchanged until 1780, when the owners, the Rohan-Chabot family, had the rooms redecorated. Although the original *boiseries* remained in place, they were probably stripped of their gilding and painted white. Evidence of lead white oil paint on the kidney shape of the LACMA paintings indicates that the paintings were put back in place before the paint was fully dry.

In the early nineteenth century the Hôtel Mazarin was purchased by Maréchal Lannes (1769–1809), Duc de Montebello, who in 1807 decided to replace the eighteenth-century *boiseries* with newly designed ones. It is unlikely that the Boucher paintings were incorporated into the remodeled rooms, but fortunately they were not sold. The widowed Duchesse de Montebello transferred them to the nearby Hôtel de Broglie, which she occupied as of 1825, a year before the Hotel de Mazarin was demolished. In the early years of the twentieth century, photographs taken in the Hôtel de Broglie show the paintings in their new setting, and by then their shapes had been altered. Additions to the corners had created a large, rectangular format, presumably so the canvases would fit into preexisting panels in the hôtel (figure 9). Shortly after the photographs were taken the paintings were removed from the hôtel and sold. Presumably about that time further alterations took place: the left and right edges were cropped (yet the signature areas carefully preserved), and additions were made to their upper and lower edges.

It was in this disguised form that the paintings arrived at LACMA in 1947 and were seen for nearly fifty years. Commenting on *Venus and Mercury Instructing Cupid* before its conservation, a critic deplored the banality of the pyramidal composition and the emptiness of the sky. Now, however, for the first time in more than a century, one can again admire Boucher's original design and his masterful sense of composition.



Figure 9
Hôtel de Broglie, Paris; photo reproduced from *Les Vieux Hôtels de Paris*, 7th ser., vol. 3, 3rd ed. Paris: F. Contet, 1920



Figure 10
François Boucher (France, 1703–70), *Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1747–66, Royal Beauvais Manufactory, wool and silk; tapestry weave, 141 x 216 in. (358.1 x 548.6 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of J. Paul Getty, 52.32

The Tapestry

We can hardly imagine today the rich visual experience of entering a room hung with sumptuously colored tapestries. Yet such a room in an eighteenth-century château or hôtel must have been the original setting for the museum's tapestry, *Bacchus and Ariadne* (figure 10), designed by François Boucher. Once part of a set (known as a suite) depicting scenes of the *Loves of the Gods*, the tapestry and its companions would have completed the wall decoration of one or more rooms.

Large wool tapestries were both functional and decorative. Until the eighteenth century they were needed to give some protection against the cold and damp in buildings without insulation or an effective source of heat. But more important, tapestries beautified architectural spaces and conveyed the wealth and status of the owner. By the early eighteenth century, they had become more fashionable than functional, and as an essential component of any aristocratic decorative scheme, they often covered both walls and furniture. Moreover, tapestry hangings and upholstery were frequently coordinated within a specific room (figure 11). As with paintings, eighteenth-century tapestries could be set into *boiseries*, thus eliminating the need for woven borders and creating an effect similar to that of printed or painted wallpapers, which had become increasingly popular since their introduction in the 1690s. Ironically, paper wall coverings were initially intended as a less expensive substitute for textile hangings, especially tapestries. (To this day we use the term “hanging” to describe the installation of wallpaper.)

The museum's tapestry was woven at the Royal Beauvais Manufactory, founded in 1664 by Jean Baptiste Colbert (1619–83) as a private enterprise with royal protection. Colbert also established the Gobelins tapestry workshop in Paris, Beauvais's main competitor for important commissions. After some initial success Beauvais went into decline until Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686–1755) became the official designer in 1726 and director from early 1754

until his death. In 1736 Oudry, overwhelmed with orders, invited Boucher to produce drawings for tapestries; in that same year he designed his first series, the *Fêtes italiennes*. From then until Boucher's death in 1770, Beauvais produced tapestries almost exclusively from drawings by the artist (even after he became director of Gobelins in 1754). Both the fortunes of Beauvais and the success of the light rococo style in interiors would have been greatly diminished had it not been for this collaboration between artist and workshop.



Figure 11
The Croome Court Room, 1728–67. Boucher designed tapestries and upholstery woven at Gobelins by Jacques-Nicolas (1714–88), Maurice Jacques (1712–84), and Louis Tessier (1719/20–81). Commissioned by the sixth earl of Coventry for his house, Croome Court, Worcestershire. Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of the Samuel H. Kress Fund, 1958.

In the strictest sense, the term “tapestry” indicates a particular weave structure, while in popular usage it has come to refer to any large hanging whether hand or machine made, woven or embroidered. To textile historians and specialists, a tapestry is a specific type of European textile intended as a furnishing fabric and created in tapestry weave. Each area of color is created from wefts (yarns inserted by the weaver) on individual bobbins interwoven between the warps (parallel yarns forming the foundation of the textile). In tapestry weave the weft does not extend across the entire fabric as in most other textiles, but loops around the warps to return and remain within the edges of each area of color. Wefts of adjacent colors can be looped around shared (figure 12a) or adjacent (figure 12b) warps, or looped around each other once (figure 12c) or twice (figure 12d). All four techniques were used in creating *Bacchus and Ariadne*.

Working from a cartoon, a more or less detailed, full-size drawing or painting of the finished design, the weaver skillfully blended colors, creating shading and subtle tonal changes to render flesh or foliage. The finest tapestries were extremely labor intensive, requiring the talents of master designers, dyers, and weavers. They were also extremely expensive; only the wealthy could commission such luxury textiles.

A scene from the story of Bacchus, god of wine, and Ariadne, daughter of the king of Crete, is the subject of the museum's tapestry. Bacchus, identified by the wreath of grapes on his head and his chariot drawn by leopards, has just arrived with his happy entourage on Naxos, his favorite island for sport. To his surprise he comes upon a young woman, Ariadne, lying in despair on the sandy shore. While she slept, the beautiful Ariadne had been abandoned by her lover, Theseus, whose ship can be seen sailing away in the distance on the right hand side of the scene. Ariadne is lamenting her fate when Bacchus and his party arrive. Boucher captured the moment when Bacchus rushes up to Ariadne to comfort her (see inside front cover). Because of the god's success at consoling her, Ariadne soon forgets Theseus and marries Bacchus, an event celebrated with days of continuous festivities.

The story of Bacchus rescuing and marrying Ariadne had been told by several Latin authors. Boucher was certainly aware of its most popular account in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (1, 537). This joyful scene had long been a subject for artists such as Titian (Tiziano Vecellio, died 1576), Annibale Carracci (1560–1609), and Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678). The depiction of the heroic cortege allowed these artists to display their proficiency at rendering wild animals, animated figures, and an atmosphere of orgiastic exuberance. Boucher certainly drew as much from these visual antecedents as he did from Ovid's text.²

Sources for several figures in the tapestry can be found among the many drawings Boucher produced during his career. He incorporated these studies into both his paintings and tapestry designs. According to tapestry scholar Edith A. Standen, drawings for



Figure 12a
Dovetailed tapestry construction

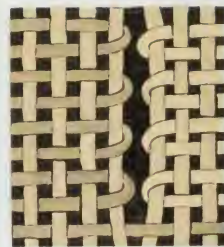


Figure 12b
Slit tapestry construction

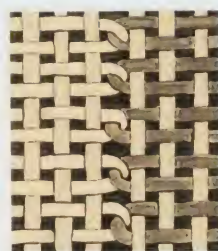


Figure 12c
Single interlocked
tapestry construction

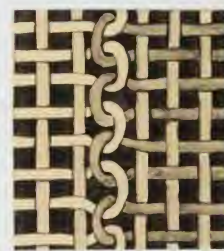


Figure 12d
Double interlocked
tapestry construction



Figure 13
Bacchus and Ariadne, detail

various elements in *Bacchus and Ariadne* can be found in several museum collections. For instance, a drawing of the kneeling woman reaching out to comfort Ariadne, a sleeping cherub curled up against her (figure 13), is in the collection of the Musée du Louvre, as is a drawing for the head of Ariadne. The Albertina, Vienna, owns a drawing of the kneeling child with a dish, seen on the far right of the tapestry (see back cover). A drawing for a fan in the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, has all the elements of the scene, but arranged differently. Standen also suggests that the leopards pulling Bacchus's chariot (figure 14) were contributed by Oudry, famous for his treatment of animal subjects, whose painting of a leopard is in the Staatliches Museum, Schwerin, Germany.³

Boucher began *Loves of the Gods*, his third series for Beauvais, in early 1747. It consisted of nine designs (listed in the order of production): *Bacchus and Ariadne*, *Neptune and Amymone*, *Pluto and Proserpine*, *Apollo and Clytie*, *Jupiter and Antiope*, *The Rape of Europa*, *Mars and Venus*, *Venus and Vulcan*, and *Boreas and Orithyia*. Weaving of the first tapestry of *Bacchus and Ariadne* began in April 1747 and was completed by January 1748.⁴ In total, the scene was woven twenty times between 1747 and 1770, occasionally singly, but usually as part of a suite with other scenes. The Beauvais records show that of the orders including *Bacchus and Ariadne*, a complete suite (and the only one) of all nine scenes was ordered by the Infante Don Felipe of Parma (son-in-law of King Louis XV); partial sets were ordered by other members of the European aristocracy and by Louis XV himself, who placed eight orders as royal gifts. As these tapestries can all be accounted for today, the museum's tapestry is most probably from a set commissioned by one of the wealthy private individuals who patronized Beauvais. The earliest such order was put on the looms from 1747 to 1748 and the latest woven from 1764 to 1766.⁵ The museum's

tapestry, therefore, must have been woven between those dates. Little else is known of its history until the early years of this century. In 1906 it was in the collection of George Fisher Baker of New York and was acquired by J. Paul Getty at Sotheby's, London, on July 24, 1939, in the Mrs. Evelyn Saint George sale. Getty donated it to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1952; earlier, in 1949 and 1951 respectively, Getty had presented two other tapestries to the museum from the *Loves of the Gods* series, *Venus and Vulcan* and *The Rape of Europa*.⁶

The master weavers of Beauvais achieved an unmatched subtlety in their tapestry weave, and with it they captured the luminosity of flesh for which Boucher was famous. But generations of accumulated dirt had almost completely obscured this aspect of the tapestry. Thus in 1996, through the generosity of Mrs. Mary Morton of Los Angeles, *Bacchus and Ariadne* was sent to the Historic Royal Palaces Textile Conservation Studios at Hampton Court Palace, England, for conservation. LACMA's curators and conservators of costumes and textiles carefully examined the tapestry in preparation for its treatment.⁷ They found nail holes on the edges of the main body and discovered the border to be a later addition, indicating that the tapestry had been woven without a framing device and had once been placed in *boiseries*. At some point it was removed from its original setting and the generic framing border added. Over several months at the conservation studios, the tapestry was washed, stitched to a support fabric for stabilization, and lined for additional support. This treatment renewed the tapestry and allowed Boucher's genius to become visible once again.⁸



Figure 14
Bacchus and Ariadne, detail

Notes

1. The conservation of the paintings was conducted under the direction of Joe Fronek and carried out by Virginia Rasmussen and Elma O'Donoghue.
2. Dale Carolyn Gluckman wishes to thank Patrice Marandel for this information.
3. *European Post-Medieval Tapestries and Related Hangings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), 2539-40.
4. Candace J. Adelson, *European Tapestry in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1994), 346; Adelson also mentions that a version combining *Bacchus and Ariadne with Jupiter and Antiope* was woven in 1748. This tapestry is now at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
6. *Venus and Vulcan* was in the A. Clement-Bayard sale, Galerie Jean Charpentier, Paris, June 22, 1937, no. 24, illustrated (Edith A. Standen, correspondence, December 20, 1971, LACMA curatorial files); *The Rape of Europa* was in the de Valenciay and Otto H. Kahn collections before being sold to J. Paul Getty by French and Co. in 1938 (LACMA curatorial files). In 1951 Getty also generously gave the museum a fourth tapestry, *Psyche Contemplating Cupid*, woven at Gobelins about 1792 after a cartoon by Clement Belle (1722-1806).
7. The conservation of the tapestry was conducted under the direction of Catherine McLean and Cara Varnell.
8. Other Boucher tapestries from the *Loves of the Gods* series are in the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino; and the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Dale Carolyn Gluckman is curator of costumes and textiles, J. Patrice Marandel is curator of European painting and sculpture, and Elma O'Donoghue was the NEA-Mellon fellow in paintings conservation in 1995-96.

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